

Finding New Messages in Television Commercials

IT'S EASY TO IMAGINE THAT TELEVISION COMMERCIALS HAVE NO REDEEMING SOCIAL value, but I found that they can be put to great use for vocabulary building and cultural awareness in an EFL situation. Recently I had the opportunity to join an English teaching project at the American Language Center in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, which had as its main objective raising the TOEFL scores of a group of university students about to go to the United States on scholarships. They were among the finest students in the country, with excellent knowledge in their fields and much theoretical knowledge about the English language. However, the TOEFL exam, which each one of them was required to take, includes testing of colloquial speech and comprehension of many culture-specific American expressions and interaction styles. It was no surprise that these students had scored disappointingly low on a preliminary TOEFL test. We had two months to help them before their departure. It was a daunting situation but, fortunately, the students were bright, curious, and willing to try something new.

I knew that I had little to offer them in their fields of study, economics and international affairs, but my knowledge of more prosaic topics would come in handy. They were keenly interested in learning more about all aspects of American culture, especially the day-to-day details of life in the United States. I created lesson plans based on several magazines I found in the library, but the most successful lessons I created were based on an unexpected resource: a videocassette of television commercials that some anonymous and prescient teacher had left behind in the teachers' room. It turned out to be a gold mine of linguistic and cultural information, which filled the gap in my students' knowledge and related well to their fields of study.

Viewing Activities

Using video effectively in the classroom requires a lesson structure that includes both previewing and postviewing activities. It is important to introduce students to the scenes by helping them create schema before viewing and to follow up with creative activities that allow them to use new vocabulary in meaningful ways.

The following is a general outline of the lessons that I put together using the videotape of commercials.

1. Previewing discussion

The lesson began with a short discussion about television commercials from three different perspectives: economics, artistry, and meaning. To examine the economic perspective, we considered two questions: Who finances television advertising? and What types of products are most likely to be advertised? To examine the artistic aspect of commercials, we considered these questions: Are television ads visually gratifying? and Are they enjoyable to watch? Finally, I asked the students to consider two possible levels of meaning in advertising: surface messages and subliminal messages.

To keep this discussion from becoming too abstract, I had students describe Uzbek and Russian television commercials they had seen. To elicit description, I asked specific questions, such as,

- Did people talk excitedly in the commercials?

- Was there a lot of movement, color, music, and dialog?
- Were the commercials humorous?
- Were the products shown for long periods of time?
- Was there much product information provided?

Students then tried to predict how American commercials might differ from those they had seen on local television. This previewing discussion lasted about 10 minutes.

2. First viewing

The eight-minute videotape of 12 commercials was shown in its entirety without interruption. Then I asked for their first reactions: Did you understand everything? Did you understand only a little bit? Were any of your predictions correct?

At this point it seemed a good idea to discuss listening skills and strategies because I could sense the students were feeling a bit panicky. They admitted that they had understood very little of the spoken language in the ads and realized that they had woefully inadequate comprehension of colloquial speech. This first viewing stage of the lesson lasted about 15 minutes.

3. Second viewing

During this stage of the lesson, the commercials were studied in-depth using a five-step analysis. Working in small groups, the students provided the information required to complete each step. We spent about 20 minutes on each commercial. Here are examples of how two different commercials were analyzed, including some questions I used to guide their analysis:

EXAMPLE 1 AD FOR CELLULAR PHONES

STEP 1: ESTABLISH THE STORY IN A FEW SENTENCES. A singer is stuck in a traffic jam and can't reach the sport stadium. He sings the national anthem into his cell phone, and it is broadcast into the stadium. The people cheer.

STEP 2: IDENTIFY THE DETAILS. How does the singer explain his predicament on the phone? What is the name of the company? Is it one of the leading cellular phone companies, or is it a new one?

STEP 3: CLARIFY THE LITERAL, SURFACE MESSAGE. You can sing into the phone and be heard loud and clear.

STEP 4: INTERPRET THE UNDERLYING, SUB-LIMINAL MESSAGE. This phone has extraordinarily clear sound.

STEP 5: ADDRESS ANY CULTURE-SPECIFIC CONTENT. What kind of ball game is it? How do people react to the national anthem? What is an 800 number?

EXAMPLE 2 AD FOR CALIFORNIA LOTTO

STEP 1: ESTABLISH THE STORY IN A FEW SENTENCES. People are asked to play the tuba; unfortunately, they can't. They are then asked if they can pick three numbers out of six, and each person says, "Yes! I can."

STEP 2: IDENTIFY THE DETAILS. What comments do people make about the tuba? What questions are repeated? What is the slogan? (It's do-able.) What does it mean?

STEP 3: CLARIFY THE LITERAL, SURFACE MESSAGE. Maybe you can't play the tuba, but you can pick out three numbers.

STEP 4: INTERPRET THE UNDERLYING, SUB-LIMINAL MESSAGE. It's easy to win at Lotto.

STEP 5: ADDRESS ANY CULTURE-SPECIFIC CONTENT. Who runs the lottery? How is gambling viewed?

4. Postviewing activities

There were two postviewing writing activities, which were done over two days. The first was a controlled writing exercise to paraphrase several commercials, using the underlying messages as cues. Students were given approximately 30 minutes to paraphrase five commercials. Here is a sample from the handout that students received to complete the assignment.

INSTRUCTIONS

Below is a list of underlying advertising messages from the videotape seen in class. In two or three sentences, explain what persuasive situation was presented in the commercial in order to get that particular message across.

Underlying Message

- This cellular phone has such good sound that voices seem live on it.

Persuasive Situation

- A man who sings into this brand of cellular phone can be heard clearly by thousands of people listening to his voice broadcast over stadium speakers.

Underlying messages of other commercials included the following:

- It is very easy to be successful in Lotto, easier than other things you might try.
- Though this detergent has been on the market for many years, it is just as good, if not better, than the new detergents.
- You can use any public telephone anywhere and still reach this friendly long distance calling service.

The second postviewing writing activity involved more creativity. I brought in some items purchased locally, such as, an envelope of soup mix, a tube of toothpaste, and a bar of soap. Working in small groups and using the television ads they had studied as models, students wrote original ads for these items. After drafting their ads, they also wrote the intended surface and underlying messages.

5. Other follow-up activities

All the students in the summer course were required to create portfolios of individual work. The following two topics, based on the students' fields of study, were assigned for independent research and writing, then included in each student's portfolio:

1. Research on the Internet the products and services advertised in the videotape, and answer these questions:

- What is the parent company?
- Is it a public-owned company that is listed on the stock exchange(s)?
- Are there any press releases regarding this product, service, or company?

2. Compare the products advertised in the videotape to national or other locally available products, and answer these questions:

- Would the American-advertised products sell well in Uzbekistan?
- If not, what changes should be made?
- What kind of local infrastructure would be necessary?

Conclusion

In retrospect, I can see that the videotape of television commercials was well-suited for my students' immediate needs. Almost every commercial had a lot of new vocabulary, including a few lines of colloquial dialog, and several cultural issues for discussion. In fact, there was enough material for even further study, but